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Navy Entomology Center of Excellence (NECE)

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Watching CDR Eric Hoffman, NECE OIC, handle a Madagascar Hissing Cockroach.

By Admiral John C. Harvey, Jr., USN Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command

I had the opportunity to visit the Navy Entomology Center of Excellence (NECE) in Jacksonville, Florida. NECE is a command under the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center (located in Portsmouth, Va) that provides technical services and expert training in reducing the risk of diseases transmitted by insects and other arthropods.

Now, insect repellent is not typically the first thought that comes to mind when we think about Force readiness, but it is indeed a very important part of protecting our Sailors and Service members who are deployed around the world. Infectious diseases, such as malaria, are not a new challenge for us. Malaria caused more casualties among U.S. Service members in the South Pacific during World War II than the enemy. In 2003 we had to evacuate 43 Marines from Liberia due to malaria (a significant impact to readiness) and we recently lost one of our Seabees who contracted the disease while deployed to Liberia. While we've certainly made significant progress over the years discovering new practices that improve our ability to prevent those diseases, transmission can be deadly and thus remains a very serious concern for our deployed Sailors and Service members.

Highlights of my visit include an overview of the reference insect collection used to educate our deploying IAs and Sailors on specific insect threats; the testing and evaluation shop where I had the opportunity to see (and use!) the equipment our Sailors use for pest control; the laboratory and the small wind-tunnel used for aerosol tests (among other things); and the NECE insectary which contains some very "interesting" bugs, including the Madagascar Hissing Cockroach.

Given my role as the Executive Agent for Individual Augmentees (IAs), I was particularly interested in learning about how we are preparing our Sailors to deploy to regions of the world endemic for malaria and other tropical

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Receiving an overview of the thermal fogger (used to control mosquitoes) from Engineman First Class Raul Pomales

diseases. In addition to learning more about the various protective measures we employ today (e.g., advanced methods for treating uniforms with repellent, bed nets, and applying and using DEET) I learned that our Entomologists deploy all over the world right alongside our other Sailors to provide the expertise necessary to help our Forces adapt to and operate in austere conditions. In fact, our Entomologists have supported combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq; Humanitarian Assistance operations such as CONTINUING PROMISE and PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP; Disaster Relief operations such as Unified Assistance in the Philippines, Indonesia and East Timor (to minimize the risk of vector-borne disease to U.S. personnel); and currently support our President's Malaria Initiative.

I was further impressed to learn that when our Sailors were confronted with shortages of fuel for the insecticide sprayers being used in Afghanistan and Iraq, our NECE Sailors, in search of an innovative solution, located a small business that had designed a unique backpack sprayer powered by compressed air. NECE worked with the company to customize the design to meet our operational needs, thoroughly test and rapidly field the much-needed device to our Sailors. Having the proper insecticide support in theater has a significant impact on our readiness (remember the 43 Marines I mentioned above). Innovative solutions, such as the compressed air backpack sprayer, do not always have to come with an expensive price tag and long acquisition cycle.

My visit to NECE was very useful and I was very impressed by the knowledge and professionalism of our NECE Sailors. And although our entomology mission may not be well-known throughout the Navy, this small group of dedicated Sailors has a very big mission that has a global impact for our Navy.

All the best, JCHjr

Editor's note:

This blog was originally posted U.S. Fleet Forces Command blog.

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